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The Trouble with Poetry: Teachers' perceptions on poetry teaching and learning in the secondary classroom

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The Trouble with Poetry: Teachers' perceptions on poetry teaching and learning in the secondary classroom

Poetry plays an important role in the subject of English in secondary schools. Not only does poetry create the opportunity to learn about playing with language, but it also allows students to familiarise themselves with the cultural heritage of the British Isles. However, in societies that are becoming increasingly multicultural and where societal and technological innovations are constantly being made, it begs the question of whether the current poetry curriculum in Key Stage 4 is still appropriate and engaging for students. One recurring problem that seems to arise is that the taught poems lack relevance for learners. Anthology poems are predominantly written by male poets from the literary canon in pre-twentieth century, which leads to an alienation of the language of poetry for learners and teachers (Dressman and Faust, 2014). Poetry has become a part of English that is focused on critical analyses, and which includes very little room for creative thought and dialogue to the point where it becomes like 'a mathematical equation', as argued by Xerri (2016, p. 1). Although teachers are willing to include a broader range of contemporary and multicultural poetry, they often feel limited by the pressure of the curriculum and assessment and time. However, there are possibilities for poetry to be made more enjoyable and inclusive for students and teachers. Four teacher interviews and a variety of empirical studies on poetry teaching (such as, McGuinn, 2014; Xerri, 2016; Benton, 2000; Myhill and Wilson, 2013) provide insights into how poetry can be made more appropriate for the learner of today as well as providing information on the trouble that educators have with teaching poetry.

Keywords: creativity; assessment; poetry education; engagement; GCSE English

The Trouble with Poetry: Teachers' perceptions on poetry teaching and learning in the secondary classroom

Introduction

Poetry has been one of the most troublesome parts of English teaching and learning over the years (McGuinn, 2014). McGuinn (2014) notes that teachers face many difficulties in engaging and motivating their students to read, analyse and discuss poetry, and often students leave school with a strong dislike towards it. This does not mean it should not be taught. Poetry offers a wide array of skills, such as critical thinking and analytical skills, but also dialogic and creative skills. Poetry is of great value in the English classroom, from both a literary and a language point of view. Furthermore, poetry has the ability to allow for a deeper understanding of culture, it is a vehicle for self-reflection and self-expression, and it is one of the more liberating aspects of the subject of English. Some of the issues with poetry teaching and learning will be explored through the means of literature and four teacher perspectives on the troubles they face in poetry teaching and learning, with additional insight into how these teachers manage and overcome these problems.

Poetry goes beyond the reading of written text on a page; it allows the reader and listener to create images, and it is performed with gestures and sounds (Gordon, 2004). Gestures, sound, imagery and text are all 'modes' that connect to poetry. Jewitt and Kress (2010) applied the term 'multimodality' to the various modes through which people communicate. Poetry can be communicated through multimodal approaches too, as poems can be performed, illustrated and envisioned through the use of imagery (Locke, 2010). A multimodal approach to poetry teaching and learning can provide learners with a broader and more in-depth understanding of the various meanings that can be linked to a poem.

In addition to multimodality, poetry can be read in different contexts too, allowing for a wide variety of interpretations. Myhill and Wilson (2013) regard poetry as a non-binary part of English, as it is open to interpretation and does not have one unique meaning. However, poetry often carries many meanings depending on the individual's experience and understanding. In the current educational climate, which focuses primarily on the GCSE assessment, existing interpretations and analyses that allow for successful grades are emphasised. On the one hand, there appears to be a struggle within the teaching and learning of poetry as poems are seen as

an artful component of English, and on the other hand, as Dressman and Faust (2014) argue, poems are often subject to formalist processes of analysis, such as unpicking techniques and reading in set contexts. In a system that looks primarily from a binary point of view of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ outcomes (Myhill and Wilson, 2013), the creative and explorative aspects of poetry struggle to survive.

Making meaning through poetry

Poetry in the classroom has the potential to create space for creativity, dialogue, critical thought, analyses, self-expression and self-reflection of the learner’s place in and with the world through the medium of the word (McGuinn and Stevens, 2004). The wide variety of purposes that poetry can have in the classroom leads to the ability for poetry to be utilised in various forms or ‘modes’. For example, poetry can be experienced through listening, vocalising, illustrating, interpreting and reading (Locke, 2010). Poetry is not bound to the language techniques and the vocabulary on the page. On the contrary, it is a vehicle for expressing the self through a variety of modes (Locke, 2010). Gordon (2004) adds that it is performed by playing with language through gesture and sound. Consequently, poetry has the potential to go beyond looking at how the poet presents themes and enables students to explore meaning making from a multimodal perspective (Gordon, 2004). Poetry offers an approach to language learning from a different angle; one where learners can play with communicating their understanding of words on a page as well as expressing themselves and reflecting on their experiences (Callaghan et al., 2018). Learners have the potential to become more proficient in various language modes by exploring the ways through which meaning can be made with poetry.

Engaging in language play through the use of multimodal practices has a positive effect on creativity and criticality in the classroom (Kress, 2010). Kress and Bezemer (2015) argue that creativity is in every sign that is made, as well as in each utterance, gesture and word written on a page. Furthermore, innovation is a valuable component of the concept of creativity, and is often seen as one of the ‘core elements’ of fostering creativity, alongside imagination, making connections and interrogation (James et al., 2019). Engaging in multimodal practices allows for students to engage with these core elements of creativity. For example, when students perform a poem, they are making their own meaning through the poem and using their imagination. They are adapting the mode of text to the mode of talk, presenting their own

interpretations through intonation and vocal expression. Subsequently, they are engaging in an act of creativity (Kress and Bezemer, 2015). By using a multimodal approach to engage learners in the creative process of interpreting texts in a variety of ways, learners can make meaning and engage critically with language and question how language is presented. Additionally, learners become more aware of the ways in which they can express themselves through language and the various modes of communication and expression they can use to achieve this.

The teaching and learning of poetry seems to have more to do with communication, expression and reflection than it has with analysing specific language techniques and unpicking the poem (Xerri, 2016). Myhill and Wilson (2013) regard poetry as a non-binary part of English, as it is open to interpretation and does not have one unique meaning. Conversely, it often carries many meanings depending on the individual's experience and understanding. On the one hand, the multiple meanings connected to poems and the various modes in which a poem can be expressed allows for creativity. On the other hand, it makes poetry more difficult to teach in a binary assessment-driven curriculum (Myhill and Wilson, 2013). In the current educational climate, which focuses primarily on the GCSE assessment, existing interpretations and analyses that allow for successful grades are emphasised.

Experiencing the poem: to decode or discuss

Students are often asked to read poems as though they are deciphering a complicated mathematical equation (Xerri, 2016). Students look up words and phrases in poems for poetic techniques, and with these, solve the poems' meanings as though they were puzzles. Benton (2000) notes that poems are often prescriptive, and the poems are crammed into the curriculum, which leaves little time to explore further and more relevant poems to the classroom. Similarly, Snapper (2015) argues that poems become objects from which to 'extract data' (p. 31), rather than poems to explore. In Benton's study (2000), 50% of teachers thought there was too little room to explore poetry in a meaningful way. Xerri (2014) argues that the routine of reproducing existing meanings of poems is almost mechanic. Although Benton's (2000) study was conducted twenty years ago, the curriculum has yet to invite a more creative and innovative approach to poetry teaching and learning. Poetry often lacks in relevance for students where there is a need for poetry to come to life (Stevens and McGuinn, 2004).

Steele (2014) mentions that the value of poetry is in the words being ‘lifted off the page’ (p. 19). Through presenting poetry using various modes, such as visual or oral modes, the poem is able to come to life, rather than being subjected to words on a page. Steele (2014) further argues that poetry should not feel like a prison of set meanings, but rather like a text to listen to and to play with. Subsequently, due to the lack in relevance of many poems, students will be more inclined to regurgitate existing answers instead of finding innovative ways of reading and seeing poetry. McGuinn (2014) points out that learners do not always understand their own answers to questions on poetry because they are reproducing what the teacher has told them, in the hope it will get them a high mark. This ‘pressure-cooker’ system (Perriman et al., 2011) for learning poetry deprives learners of reading poetry as a form of art, and often shows poetry in a distant and mechanical light that tends to lack in engagement with poetry and lack of understanding of the value of it too.

Alongside exam pressures, students and teachers often worry about time, as both Benton (2000) and Dymoke (2001) argue. Although teachers are willing to include poetry writing in the upper key stages, this is often lacking due to the pressure on completing the assessment materials (Dymoke, 2001). Hennessy and McNamara (2011) explored student input and subjectivity in poetry lessons. They found that 53.5% of students were never asked to engage with a poem in a subjective manner (Hennessy and McNamara, 2011). Furthermore, these students mentioned that they were often ‘just told’ what a poem meant, rather than making meaning themselves (Hennessy and McNamara, 2011, p. 213). In a sense, the teacher is holding the students by the hand to ensure that they have all the necessary information to pass the exam in the shortest time possible.

Methods

For the purpose of this study, a case study design has been used with a phenomenographic approach in order to analyse four teacher interviews. This allows for an exploratory approach towards current issues with poetry, and emphasises the teachers’ points of view in the interviews (Feldon and Tofel-Grehl, 2018). The interviews were semi-structured to allow the teachers to offer their own views on the value and the teaching and learning of poetry. The findings showed that teachers often struggle with the way poetry is taught in Key Stage 4. The themes of ‘time’, ‘assessment’ and ‘creativity’ were recurring concepts that teachers struggled with in the teaching and learning of poetry. The troubles with poetry are discussed by teachers,

and all teachers see the value of poetry. In the interviews they discuss their methods of engaging learners as well as the constraints felt due to the curriculum and the focus of the current education system on assessment.

The interviews included predominantly ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, to allow for the teachers to share their knowledge, understanding and experience. A case study method with a phenomenographic approach was found to be most fitting (Yin, 2014; Feldon and Tofel-Grehl, 2018). Feldon and Tofel-Grehl (2018) argue that phenomenography is a successful way of constructing an understanding between experience and personal meaning. The interview questions are semi-structured to allow for discussion on both experience and personal meaning. Additionally, Yin (2014) mentions that research with a focus on the present lends itself well to a case study approach. Subsequently, a combination of these two research styles was chosen for the purpose of this study. These interviews focus on current teaching practice with regard to poetry in Key Stage 4 and are part of a wider study that includes surveys and observations.

Four teachers with each a unique point of view regarding the teaching and learning of poetry were chosen, so as to provide a deeper insightfulness into problems and resilience in poetry lessons. The interview outcomes offer the teachers’ personal views and their attitudes and perceptions of poetry in the secondary classroom. The first teacher is a teacher from The Netherlands. In this country, teachers are not bound by poetry anthologies and although it is advised to teach three different literary components, it is the teacher’s and the school’s choice whether to teach poetry or not. This teacher is positive about poetry teaching and learning and finds it a valuable component to English due to the space for creativity and criticality as well as for learners to play with words and extend their understanding of English language and their vocabulary.

The other three teachers are from two comprehensive schools in the North East of England; these teachers all see the value of teaching and learning poetry in the secondary school classroom. Teacher 2 teaches predominantly year 9 and finds the opportunity that poetry has for engaging in discussion particularly valuable. This teacher uses discussion in groups or as a whole class extensively to create relevance and understanding of the poem for the learners. Additionally, this teacher uses poetry as a tool for understanding themes in other literary texts, such as the theme of good and evil in the novel. Teacher 3 teaches Key Stage 4 (years 10 and 11), and although the focus is predominantly on assessment, this teacher aims to include creativity throughout the lesson as well as using poems to expand learners’ vocabulary.

Furthermore, Teacher 3 emphasises the value of making poetry relatable to the learner. Teacher 4 includes extensive group work in the lessons and aims for creative thought throughout the poetry sessions. This teacher values poetry writing to stimulate creativity, but also feels that there is limited time to include writing. Teacher 4 worries that students do not understand the value of creativity due to the focus on assessment.

Findings: Teachers' perceptions

The interviews highlighted five themes. Namely, assessment; time; creativity; engagement; and emotion. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on creativity, and assessment, with some mention of time as it has strong links to assessment pressure. Teacher 1 has most freedom in their teaching methods and is able to include various creative writing components, which emphasise language play, as part of poetry teaching and learning. Furthermore, this includes the use of a variety of modes, such as talk, listening, imagery, writing and reading. One of the methods for learning to play with language, which for these learners is a second language, was cut-up poetry. The student cuts up words from a newspaper or magazine and re-orders them to form new meanings (Burroughs, 1961). This activity was introduced to the students as a group project. Teacher 1 mentioned that cut-up poetry activities *'quietened the critical voice for a while'* and gave *'them something concrete to do.'* Cut-up poetry allowed the students to perform their poem, to create an image with the use of text and allowed for discussion or 'talk' about the poems that were created.

The teacher felt this exercise was valuable because it teaches the students that poetry is not only about *'having a pre-formed idea and then setting it down, but also about discovering what you think or associate, by describing, by banging together a load of language and see what comes out of it.'* The value of cut-up poetry lies with playing with language, rather than focus on techniques, meanings and interpretations: *'I wanted them to experience playing with language, rather than with expressing themselves, which is this idea that people automatically have about [poetry].'* Teacher 1 explains the value here of writing poetry and creating something concrete. The trouble with the English curriculum is that due to the pressure on learning the anthology poems and studying unseen poetry, there tends to be little time for exploring language play through poetry writing. Furthermore, poetry writing plays no role in the exam and is therefore often excluded from lessons due to pressure and time constraints.

All interviewed teachers acknowledged the value of creativity in the classroom, and all aimed to include creative teaching and learning, which allows students to problem-solve, rather than providing them with pre-existing answers (Newton, 2014). Teacher 2 said that creativity was *'being able to step away from the confines of structure and having their own ideas and some freedom with the subject.'* Teacher 2 commented that *'it is in the sort of rule book of the exam that they do have to be creative.'* Although teachers understand the value of creativity and the need for it and examiners applaud creativity in assessment, the problem that arises is that creativity is not clearly defined anywhere in the curriculum (DfE, 2014). The concept 'creativity' only gets one mention in the English curriculum, so although teachers do feel the need to include it, creative learning is often moved to the backseat. Teacher 4 said students are *'not proud of being creative'*, and mentioned that *'it's probably to do with how they perceive creativity and who they think should be creative and I think actually our kids don't see the value in that.'* This teacher mentioned a few times that students do not grasp the value of creativity in life due to the focus on *'the end goal'*, rather than on the process.

All teachers stated that poetry is a subject that lends itself well to creativity as it plays with language and allows for the development of students' voices (Kim, 2017) as well as exploring experiences and emotions of the self and others (Tempest, 2020). Teacher 3 noted that poetry is a *'convinced way of being creative'*, because *'when you write poetry or when you appreciate poetry you do notice that every word counts.'* This teacher also mentioned that *'the only problem is at GCSE there's no real call to write a poem.'* This lack in poetry writing in the upper years of secondary school could be seen in the surveys too, where most students mention that the last time they wrote a poem was in year 6 or 7. Although there is little to no poetry writing in Key Stage 4, it seems that there is still opportunity for creative thought and dialogue in the classroom. Teacher 2 complemented this notion by saying that they think *'poems stimulate excellent class discussions; I've had some excellent discussions over poetry as well.'*

Teacher 4 stated that *'unless they choose to take a creative subject to GCSE by the time they get to year 9, most of them aren't doing any creative things in their curriculum at all.'* Furthermore, the teacher commented that *'poetry would be such a lovely way to get them to explore that and to build up the confidence for them to share kind of their own creative ideas and (...) talk about how they feel about things.'* This teacher argued throughout the interview for poetry as one of the few creative aspects in Key Stage 4 that is compulsory for all students. Although the teachers see the benefit of creativity, Teacher 4 worried about students' understanding and appreciation of creativity:

I wonder how valuable children see creativity as. [...] and again it's understandable but I think we're so focused on this end product, you know, 'Get your GCSE', 'Get a job'. [...] It's almost machine-like and I think perhaps being creative is not a skill that we encourage in them so although they can (...) recognise that poetry is creative, they don't then necessarily make that next step, which is to see that being creative is a good thing.

Students cannot fully engage creatively when they do not understand the value of this concept, or understand what creativity means in itself. Teacher 4 commented at the end that after this interview she:

would really like to think about [...] this idea of being creative. [...] I think I've become very guilty of kind of going through the motions of the anthology poetry and not really thinking about how I'm teaching it. And I think for next year, what I'd maybe like to try to do is just think of ways I can be creative within the constraints of the curriculum. I think it's not the ideal environment to be creative within to be honest, but there's definitely got to be ways of doing it so I really do want to think more about that and try to come up with some strategies.

This shows an awareness of the value that creativity has in the classroom for teachers, particularly with respect to poetry. Furthermore, once the teacher had taken time to consider the value and purpose of creativity in combination with poetry, they engaged in the thought process of how creativity could be included in the poetry classroom. The interview with Teacher 4 showed there was little to no support for using creative teaching and learning practises in the classroom concerning poetry teaching and learning. Assessment, time and creativity seem to be themes that are currently working against each other rather than with each other to create a purposeful and enjoyable classroom environment.

Discussion

Poetry is a troubled part of English, which has equal links to both the arts and English. Poetry tends to lend itself well to discussion and dialogue; the teachers have also mentioned this in the interviews. Poetry is subject to a multimodal approach for making meaning. Through the modes of talk, text, imagery, gestures and signs, poetry can be brought to life and 'lifted off the page' (Gordon, 2004; Steele, 2014). However, poetry is more often associated with specific analyses

and reproducing the teachers' analyses in the classroom, causing poetry to become mechanical, rather than an opportunity for creative expression and reflection (Xerri, 2017). This causes the value of poetry for students to decrease and allows for less contribution of original ideas, and more spoon-fed behaviour (Hennessy and McNamara, 2011). Poetry can be seen as one of the most difficult aspects of English to teach in a curriculum that focuses heavily on assessment; however, the teachers in the interviews show that it is not impossible to include dialogue and discussion in the poetry classroom. For instance, teachers are able to engage in thought-provoking discussions with students, and by allowing students to discuss poems in groups, it allows for dialogue to happen.

Teachers face issues due to time constraints, a lack of emphasis on creativity and the heavy focus on assessment. However, all teachers agreed that poetry is an important aspect of English as it allows students to engage in discussion, to empathise and to experience language through playing with it as well as exploring varieties of meanings and interpretations and extending vocabulary. Teachers all remarked that there is very little room for poetry writing, even though they would all like to see more of this. Although there are many problems with teaching and learning poetry in the current educational climate, which is driven towards a binary assessment format that primarily focuses on right and wrong (Myhill and Wilson, 2013), it is clear that poetry can play a vital and purposeful part of English if it is given the chance.

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